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News Release



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Draft Revised Recovery Plan Released for the Nēnē

For more than half a century, many people throughout the world have helped to rescue the Hawaiian goose or nēnē from the brink of extinction. Initial recovery efforts focused on captive breeding which began in 1949 and subsequent releases of captive-bred birds released back into the wild since 1960. Today, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) released a draft revised recovery plan for this endangered species. The plan, open for public review and comment, provides detailed guidance for the recovery of the species.

The draft revised recovery plan for Hawaii's state bird was developed by the Service in conjunction with the Nēnē Recovery Action Group, which is comprised of state and federal agency representatives.

The interim goal of the plan is to increase nēnē population sizes and geographic distribution sufficiently to consider reclassification of this endangered species to threatened status. The ultimate goal of the plan is to obtain sufficient population numbers and distribution to warrant removal from the Federal List of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants.

"Many caring, dedicated people have contributed a significant part of their lives to the protection and conservation of Hawaii's most beloved bird," said Gina Shultz, acting field supervisor for the Fish and Wildlife Service's Pacific Islands Fish and Wildlife Office. "This beautiful, majestic bird harbors a special place in the hearts of many and it deserves the attention it receives."

Listed as endangered in 1967, the nēnē (*Branta sandvicensis*) is the eighth most endangered waterfowl species in the world. It shares a common ancestry with the Canada goose.

The plan's recovery objective is to restore and maintain multiple self-sustaining populations on Hawai'i, Maui Nui (Maui, Moloka'i, Lanai, and Kahoolawe), and Kaua'i. In

addition, the threats to the species must be reduced to allow for the long-term viability of these populations. Sufficient suitable habitat must be identified, protected and managed in perpetuity on each of the islands.

The revised recovery plan includes detailed criteria necessary to downlist the species from “endangered” to “threatened” status and delist the species. To be downlisted, all criteria must be reached and maintained for a period of 15 years. For the nēnē to be removed from the Federal List of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants, all delisting criteria must be met and population levels have to show a stable or increasing trend for a minimum of an additional 15 years.

Specific actions needed to recover the species include the protection of nēnē habitat, control of introduced predators, continuation of a captive propagation program, establishment of additional populations, reduction of conflicts between nēnē and human activities, additional research and creation of a public education and information program.

The release of the draft revised recovery plan comes at a time when the state is preparing to celebrate the Second Annual Nēnē Day and the release of captive-bred birds at Piipiholo Ranch, Maui. Schoolchildren and adults alike will celebrate the state bird of Hawaiʻi and one of the world’s most endangered waterfowl on September 26. Children across the state will participate in a contest that encourages creativity and promotes awareness for the nēnē. Activities will include coloring, art, and essay contests for grades ranging from kindergarten through high school.

Unique to the Hawaiian Islands, this medium-sized goose grows up to 27 inches tall and 5.5 pounds in weight. Throughout the centuries, the nēnē has adapted to terrestrial life with greatly reduced webbing between the toes, smaller wings and larger hind legs.

Both sexes have similar plumage. The crown and back of the neck are black, with a bright, cream-colored cheek patch. The sides of the neck are beige with deep furrows that are unique among waterfowl. The bill, legs, feet and tail feathers are black. The back and upper wing areas are gray-brown with lighter-colored edges that give a scaled or barred appearance. The sides, chest and belly appear less scaled with a lighter gray-brown color. The rump is pure white, and the eyes are a deep chestnut brown.

The nēnē has the longest nesting season reported for wild geese, with eggs being reported during all months except May, June and July. However, most of the birds in the wild nest between October and March. The nēnē nests on the ground, laying from three to five eggs on average; goslings typically remain with their parents until the next breeding season.

In 1952, the remaining nēnē population was estimated to be about 30 birds. Current estimates are around 1,300 birds in different populations on the islands of Hawaiʻi, Maui, Molokaʻi, and Kauaʻi. Current statewide distribution has been determined largely by the locations of release sites of captive-bred birds.

Almost half of the statewide population exists on Kauaʻi, probably due to the fact that mongoose are not known to be established on the island. Other factors that may attribute to the success of nēnē on Kauaʻi are an active predator control program near nesting sites and effective fencing, greater availability of lowland sites and irrigation of areas around Kilauea Point, which may attract nesting birds and increase gosling survival.

The historic distribution of the nēnē (after 1778) reflects only a portion of the range the bird once occupied. It is likely they utilized grasslands, grassy shrublands and dryland forest. Nēnē currently inhabit elevations ranging from sea level to 8,000 feet that typically receive less than 90 inches of annual rainfall. Habitat types used by the bird currently vary greatly from coastal dune vegetation and nonnative grasslands to sparsely vegetated lava flows and open native and nonnative alpine communities.

Many factors have contributed to the decline of the nēnē. The first humans to Hawaiʻi exploited nēnē for food, destroyed lowland habitat and introduced the first mammalian predators such as Polynesian rats, pigs and dogs. The exploitation of the bird for food, by Hawaiians and non-Polynesian settlers, is believed to have been responsible for substantial population declines in lowland areas. Hunting was a major limiting factor until a hunting ban was passed and enforced in 1907.

Currently, it is believed that the following threats are major obstacles to nēnē recovery: predation, nutrition deficiency due to habitat degradation, lack of lowland habitat, human-caused disturbance and mortality, behavioral problems and inbreeding depression. Predation by nonnative species including mongoose, cats, and rats is believed to be the greatest threat to the species.

The availability of the draft recovery plan for a 60-day public comment period was announced in the *Federal Register* on September 24, 2004. Copies of the draft recovery plan are available through the Fish and Wildlife Service's website at <http://pacificislands.fws.gov> or by calling the Fish and Wildlife Service's Honolulu office at 808 792 9400. Written comments may be submitted until November 23, 2004 to the Field Supervisor, Pacific Islands Fish and Wildlife Office, 300 Ala Moana Blvd., Room 3-122, Box 50088, Honolulu, HI 96850.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 544 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 63 Fish and Wildlife Management offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.